IFS Reports from Vietnam

Where People Fear To Mention What They Want Most

"Johnson can talk about peace in Vietnam, but we go to jail for advocating it."
—South Vietnamese woman pacifist in Saigon at a meeting with A. J. Muste's CNVA peace delegation Apr. 1966.

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What It's Like To Be In Saigon

What I remember most of Saigon is the heat, the squalor and the despair. I began by being terribly frustrated and ended by being terribly fascinated. The frustration arose from trying to get things done in a country which seems engaged in a giant conspiracy to slow everything down; I'd hate to have to run a war in the vast snafu that is South Vietnam; only an Eagle Scout like Westmoreland could stand it without going off his rocker. Just what the fascination was I don't quite know, perhaps it was the ringside seat Saigon offers on the inexhaustible vitality and folly of the human race.

The heat lay like a suffocating blanket on the city, and it was hard to know which was worse, the sunny days or the cloudy when a blue haze of carbon monoxide lay low over the teeming streets. At night with the windows open in a cheap hotel which charged New York prices, one slept not just naked but with every pore alert for an occasional hint of breeze. After the midnight curfew one is awakened from time to time by the dull thud of mortars like a giant tapping on distant doors. One night the whole hotel shook, the doors went rat-tat-tat, as a huge armada passed overhead and dumped its deadly freight somewhere far off in the darkness. There were three waves of this miniature earthquake and one suddenly realized the meaning of the term privileged sanctuary, for Americans in Vietnam can sleep with the assurance that amid the heavy traffic overhead, there are no enemy planes. Goliath never had it so good.

A Government Falling Apart

Even on the quieter nights, sleep begins to be impossible around five. There is a constant roar of heavy trucks from the clogged waterfront nearby. The noise overhead surpasses that in the areas adjoining La Guardia airport, and starts much earlier; the decibel factor alone makes it easy to believe that Saigon's Tan Son Nhut is now the world's busiest airport. The guerrillas have cut the railroads and made the roads impassible everywhere—except for those who pay their fees and are granted passage. For Americans it is safe to travel only in the skies. In the morning one emerges early on streets from which the garbage is no longer carted away. This and the lax currency control on entry are the first signs of disintegration; the government is falling apart. The generals maneuver, no longer so much for power as for some political foothold. Their wives, so it is said, are the brains of the family and devote them to the business of selling export and import licenses. The coolies who used to collect the garbage probably make five times as much now on the docks or in construction, for labor is scarce in the war boom that has seized Saigon. One newspaper article I saw suggested that maybe garbage collection ought to be handed over to free enterprise, a touching testimonial to the spread of the American theology to these lands beyond the sea.

What The VC Say In The Back Alleys

"Saigon (Vietnamese Press), April 24 — Reliable sources in Saigon said the VC [Viet Cong] has been exploiting the prices spiralling and recent political unrest in Saigon and some other cities to incite the mass, especially laborers, to struggle for a higher standard of living and for democracy. The above sources disclosed that the VC spread propaganda leaflets last April 3 at Alley 22 of Ton Dan Street, Saigon, appealing (sic) the workers and laborers to 'lead' the struggle movement by asking for wagelifts and reduction of working hours. The leaflets also urged them to go on strike with a view to hamper all activities and upset the national economy. The sources said the VC also urged youth groups to organize seminars, adopt resolutions and go on strike for an end to military operations in the provinces as well as for the cancellation of the curfew and the drafting into the armed forces."

—Saigon Daily News, April 25

In the mornings, moving from air-conditioned U.S. offices to the hot bake-oven outside, one felt 98 years old by 10 a.m. and ready to collapse in a pre-lunch siesta under an electric fan, those days electricity was available. After lunch, one hastened back to the darkened and sweaty refuge of one's hotel room. The once beautiful and broad avenues of the great city outside are filled with a mad tangle of vehicles. Here a tiny donkey cart carries a rustic family into town; it is loaded down with pots and pans and bags. From the interstices children look out big-eyed with wonder. There a two-seater cyclopus goes by with two soigné matrons, exquisitely kept in their privileged middle age, engaged in shrewd and vivacious conversation. The streets swarm with cyclopuses—the old rickshaw raised to a higher technological level by being wedded to the bicycle, with which the driver pushes from behind. Next in the hierarchy of public transport is the motorized cyclopus, then tiny Renault taxis. They contest the streets with a constant flow of jeeps and military buses. Maneuvering dashingly amid this wildly tooting herd of vehicles is an occasional Vietnamese motorcycle "cowboy" with miniature Stetson and tight Western movie pants. The costume makes the slight, delicate-boned Vietnamese look more man-

(*Continued on Page Two*)

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(*Continued from Page One*)

nikin than man, a tiny caricature of a Texan. The scene is dominated from time to time by the passage, often under armed escort, of some Vietnamese VIP in a Peugot, Mercedes-Benz or Cadillac; these testify to how many people do quite well on the war.

The Overflow from The PX

Most of the people's daily life seems to be spent in the streets. On the crowded sidewalks, capitalism is in flower. Half the population of Saigon seems to have set itself up in business with items from the American PX. Everywhere there are tiny stalls selling Gillette razor blades, Spearmint chewing gum, Almond Joys, Colgate toothpaste, Chesterfield cigarettes and Hershey bars at a generous markup. So large an outflow from the PX indicates that military service has not stifled the Yankee trader spirit in our troops. Along the curb and under the stalls mats are spread on which whole families lunch and dine; the food is cooked on a tiny brazier, and delicately served by the mothers. The meals, mostly seafood stews served on rice, are eaten with the gusto of a family picnic. Everybody seems to be having a good time, from the children begging in the streets to the shoeshine boys showing off to an admiring crowd how much they can overcharge the big barbarians from oversea. In the endless pageantry of the streets, I even encountered one patriotic demonstration. Just before 8 a.m. on Nguyen Hue street I was attracted by a crowd standing at attention while the South Vietnamese flag was raised and a loud speaker broadcast the national anthem. When the ceremony was finished the crowd filed into the building. It was the headquarters of the General Confederation of Employers. This evidence of a renaissance in national spirit may give Henry Cabot Lodge a lift.

The crew of the Air Vietnam plane on which I flew from Hong Kong to Saigon was entirely Vietnamese. Lunch was first rate French Asian cusine with good French wines. The stewardess gave me my first glimpse of how demurely seductive the Vietnamese woman's costume can be: delectably feminine loose flowing pants as the undergarment, usually white, with a kind of split sari over it of contrasting color. It is the direct opposite of the strip tease. The girl is completely covered from throat to feet, not even the ankles are visible. Yet as the girl moves the flowing garments suddenly mold and reveal the figure for a fleeting intimate moment. The moving limbs provide a constant, spontaneous and luminous ballet.

The civilian arrival hall of the airport at Saigon was a huge shed of wood and tin, almost furnace-like in its suffocating heat. When I finally got away in an Air Vietnam bus, the sky was a luscious pale blue with tufts of white cloud but the scene below was hot and dusty. April, before the monsoon rains begin, is Saigon's hottest and driest month. I saw no signs of the mortar attack on the airport a few days earlier. It must have been in a distant corner of that huge airport. There was a big unpainted restaurant with a billboard in French advertising the first dentifrice of the Republic with "fluor". Other billboards as we sped by advertised the Lambretta scooter, GM's Cadillacs and Chevrolets, and Pan Am. We passed villas taken over by the military. Sandbag embankments were visible behind their low white walls. Some of the villas were as big as palaces. We went over a bridge and caught a glimpse of dark unpainted shacks high on stilts along a river bank as far as one could see. Near them, set back from the water, were white and pink stucco villas with gardens behind high white walls. The rich and the poor seemed to live almost side by side in this neighborhood.

At the hot dusty freight shed which is Saigon's air terminus, a taxi driver made a deal with me—the newly arrived sucker— for 200 piastres to the Hotel Caravelle, or 10 times the normal price. Then he strode off in lordly satisfaction, leaving me to handle my bags. Several eager urchins seized them despite my effort to explain in French and English that

Freedom of Assembly in Saigon

"Saigon, April 24—Eight persons were arrested Saturday night at a house on Alley III, Phu Tho street, on charges of holding an illegal meeting. The purpose of their meeting was unknown."

—Saigon Daily News, April 25

I had no cash. When I got into the miniature cab and left them empty handed, I was treated to a pantomime of pained indignation and an outburst of grandiloquent Vietnamese by the budding entrepeneurs until my lordly driver handed out two 5-piastre bills to quiet down the demonstration. At the Caravelle, only a few blocks away, I learned that my telegraphic confirmation of a reservation was worthless. I soon discovered that the Caravelle was inhabited by phantoms. I had the names of half a dozen persons to see, all presumably at the Caravelle, and all equally unknown to the management. I did not learn until later that every room there was acquired only by intricate bribery; the lucky few who have rooms are forced to treat the management as a pampered mistress; one day asked to bring expensive film from the PX, another day some choice foodstuff. The only exception was A. J. Muste and his CNVA delegation which got a big room, perhaps because it was conveniently wired for sound by the police and they preferred to have the pacifists where they could keep a close watch on their comings and goings. I soon was sent off to what I was assured was a modern air-conditioned hotel. The room at the Federal turned out to have a broken down fan and a shower which never once in my eight day stay had hot water.

A Moment of Apprehension

Saigon, as I emerged on it that Sunday afternoon, must have been a lovely French Asian capital before the war with its broad tree-lined boulevards, open squares and shady arcades. Now it seemed an Asiatic honky tonk. Though it was siesta time, here and there U.S. soldiers in pairs sauntered dolefully past the many bars looking like Bill Mauldin types in search of an ersatz Mama. Small boys were already out pimping in the hot afternoon, hinting in pidgin English at bizarre pleasures. The immemorial entrepeneurial spirit flourished in the world's oldest commodity, women, but the soldiers seemed too shy to close such deals in broad daylight. Warding off importunate pedicab drivers I made straight for the big white building at Nguyen Hué street and Le Loi boulevard which is the center of journalistic activity in Saigon—JUSPAO, the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, on a square adjoining the white walled palace of Saigon's City Hall. JUSPAO is surrounded by a barricade, with a guard house at either end. I got by one of them only to find the main entrance locked. As I walked from one locked door to another, alone behind that white-washed barricade, one lone American in full view of the promenading Sunday crowds, I felt conspicuously alone, an easy tempting target for any potshot from a VC sympathizer. That was my one moment of apprehension. Soon one treats the chance of being hit by a bomb in Saigon as matter-of-factly as the chance of an auto accident in the States.

Fortunately one locked side door was soon opened for me by a lonesome duty officer. I was greeted inside by a huge picture of Lyndon Johnson, looking in that setting almost Orientally inscrutable. Next to the picture was a sign in English and Vietnamese saying peremptorily, "Clear your weapon before going topside." When I asked the duty officer what clearing one's weapon meant, he said it meant taking any live bullets out before going upstairs but that actually the order had been superseded by a later one simply requiring all weapons to be left below. I was heartened by this sign of progress.

Before being permanently accredited as an American correspondent, one has to obtain a press card from the

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South Vietnamese government. This is the sole act of deference to Vietnamese sovereignty required of the visiting American. The contrast between the two press HQs reflects the real balance of forces. JUSPAO has taken over a multistoried elegant white building on one of the town's most important squares. The ARVN press office is housed in a nearby second story loft, dark, grimy and cooled only by an old-fashioned fan. A press card is issued without question, and for most U.S. correspondents that one visit to the loft is all they will make during their tour of duty. A formal military press briefing is held there at 4:30 p.m. each day, a half hour before the daily briefing at JUSPAO, but only a few wire service men, on days when they are hungry for news, turn up. The military briefing officer speaks in Vietnamese but often interrupts his interpreter to correct the latter's sometimes incomprehensible English.

An American Oasis

Back across the street, in the air-conditioned realm of JUSPAO, with its snack bar, its PX and—like oases—its clean water fountains, the American finds himself, as the French say, *chez lui*, at home. The newcomer, even if a stray heretic like myself, encounters that unpretentious amiability which is the most attractive and democratic side of our American character. I had failed to bring the required letter from one's editor but after some good-humored joshing from a press officer who told the military I was chief cook and bottle-washer of my own publication, my card was issued. I was also asked to sign a form absolving the U.S. government from liability if anything happened to me while riding in a military plane. During the eight days I was in Saigon I met with nothing but courtesy from U.S. officers, civilian or military. The question in my mind was how so many well-meaning, friendly and intelligent people, with so much in the way of funds and Vietnamese informers at their disposal, could guess so consistently wrong about events in Vietnam. Honolulu, and its aftermath of anti-American riots, were only the latest examples of this incomprehension. I would like to sketch out a tentative answer on the basis of what I saw and heard.

The first thing that strikes one is the extent to which the Americans in Vietnam live in enclaves—not just military but psychological enclaves. JUSPAO, the Embassy, the various AID missions and the military HQs in Saigon are like miniature fortresses in a hostile land. They reminded me strongly of the sand-bagged and barricaded offices of the British in their conflict with Israel's Haganah and the terrorists in the three turbulent years before Britain withdrew from Palestine in 1948. But these fortresses are vulnerable from within; they depend on Vietnamese employes and there is no certain way to distinguish friend from foe. The situation must be apple pie for the Viet Cong intelligence. Our press and our soldiers live in a world apart; few speak even such bad French as mine, much less Vietnamese. The mentality we develop is the compound complex which has always afflicted foreigners living as traders or soldiers in a foreign land. We bring America with us wherever we go, and live wrapped in a kind of cellophane which separates us from the people of the country. Our relations with them are almost entirely mercenary, and the women, the informers and the soldiers we buy are about as unsatisfactory as bought love is everywhere. They must secretly regard us with amusement or contempt.

To watch the young Ivy Leaguers arriving briskly at the Embassy of a morning is to feel oneself on the eve of the Harvard-Yale game. The team spirit is bursting out all over; it demands optimism; patriotism is equated with euphoria. All is for the best, albeit not in the best of all possible worlds. One day the official spokesman is enthusiastic about the firing of General Thi as a move against "warlordism". When Thi's removal turns out to be a bad mistake, the same spokesman discovers that these are just the birth pangs in South Vietnam of "Federalism", the problem of integrating each region into the national whole. He even touches on the U.S. Civil War until a tart newsman suggests there are enough civil wars going on in South Vietnam without rehashing the problem of the Gray and the Blue. Everything is public relations and public relations is make-believe. Every top official is more concerned with his "image" than with unpleasant realities. To mention these is to get off the team. Bright gimmicks are turned into speeches and proliferate into pamphlets long before anything has been accomplished or even after hopes have collapsed. The word is taken for the deed. As one moves from talking to the men who work in the field to those who work in Saigon and then think of the men in Washington, one sees that the further from the scene the more imaginary the picture we have created. The most confining enclave of all is this enclave in our heads.

The Pinch on the Poor

"Saigon, April 12—Prices in the capital have again taken a jump, this time as a result of the early curfew brought on by the disturbances here, a vernacular newspaper reported today. Among the foodstuffs included in the price hike have been rice, fish, meat and vegetables, according to the daily 'Chinh Luan'. A ten kilo bag of the lowest quality rice has risen from 300 to 500 piastres, river fish have risen from 60 to 100 piastres and meat has gone up a couple of piastres per kilo." *—Saigon Daily News, April 13*

Animosity and Arrogance

Under the supposed benevolence of our policy one soon detects a deep animosity to the Vietnamese and a vast arrogance. We assume the right to remold them, whether they choose to be remolded or not. The war, like the cold war, has developed a vein of zealotry alien to the easy-going American character. An enthusiastic psychological warrior, anxious to impress me, took me out for a drink on the cool veranda of the Continental Palace; one could imagine how the French planters and civil servants must have gathered there in the afternoons for their aperitifs. My new found friend—he claimed to know all about me—told me that in working with captured VC he found that 95% were "recoverable" human beings. It was my first evening and I did not dare repay his hospitality by asking what we did with the other 5%—dispose of them like Kleenex? Directives go down from on high to treat the villagers with some discrimination. But the poor GI's one encounters are too full of rage at the fate which has brought them there. A boy from Mobile told me 50% of the people in Saigon were VC, 45% indifferent and 5% with us; he thought we ought to go all-out to win the war—smash Hanoi—or go home. His buddy from Minnesota said at first he had been afraid all the time. He described the sleepless nights in the jungle, the stink of the water. Now he had become a fatalist; he felt he might get it anywhere, so why worry? Terrorism is hard to take, to see a buddy blown up by a mine or knocked off by a sniper hardly makes one benevolent to the natives. One hears frightful stories of troops in the field setting fire to villages or, on evacuating them, defecating in the cooking utensils, out of sheer hate and resentment.

In Saigon, on R and R (rest and recreation), the bar girls gyp the troops with the skill of their sisters in the clip joints of Greenwich Village. A soldier can spend a month's pay on "Saigon tea" and emerge as virgin as he entered. The soldiers feel that they are taken advantage of on every hand, and they are. I heard a burly sergeant explode one night at the Caravelle when he found, as usual, that advance reservations had been ignored. "We're out there in the jungle trying to hold this country together," he shouted angrily, "and this is what we get for it." There is hardly benevolence in the words one hears so frequently at the daily military brief-

(*Continued on Page Four*)

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(*Continued from Page Three*)

ing—"search and destroy"—as if we were an Old Testament God. In the cool panelled classroom in which the briefings are held, the only theory of the war which seems to emerge is implied by the "kill count" as if we were on an insect extermination mission and could go home when all the termites had been destroyed. It is significant that those like Gen. Lansdale and Colonel John Paul Vann who would approach the Vietnamese as people soon find themselves sidetracked, suspect and frustrated. The machine instinctively reacts against the human, and what we are running, or what is running us, is a bureaucratic war machine.

All Is Forgiven the Machine

Americans with cameras search out VC atrocities with indignation, but the use of napalm and saturation bombing is regarded merely as another form of technology. The machine is forgiven atrocities many-fold more terrible than those of the guerrillas. The Vietnamese are expendable. I came across cold warriors who operated in Germany, in Bolivia, in Brazil and in Santo Domingo and now, in all innocence, commit similar follies in Vietnam. They place a very high value on the purity of their intentions and a very low estimate on the motivations of the Vietnamese. One old acquaintance gave me a briefing on all we were doing for the Vienamese and then dropped remarks which revealed a very different attitude. The editors in Saigon, who have been asking for freedom of the press, called a one-day general strike to protest an attack on a pro-government editor (the military could hardly object to that) but appended to this a demand for greater press freedom. When I asked my friend about this, he said cynically, "they only wanted to save a day's newsprint." Yet he had been telling me we were there to protect democracy from communism. Every demand for democratic rights is regarded as perverse if not subversive; this is also the basic attitude toward elections. One often feels our people regard the Vietnamese as irrelevant to our world-wide holy war against Communism. As my friend said, "After all it's only an accident that this was is being fought here. We have to smash the idea of wars of liberation." If Vietnam and the Vietnamese are badly battered in the process, it's too bad. The growing awareness of this essential indifference to their fate is giving the Vietnamese a common despair that might some day prove stronger even than fratricidal passion.

You Can't Even Trust the Lilies

"Around Da Nang a patrol from the 9th Marines Regiment captured one Viet Cong hiding in a bunker. Near Tu Cau II village, another patrol from the 9th Marines spotted four VC camouflaged with lily pads crossing the Vinh Dien River. The Marines, firing at the swiftly moving lily pads, killed three of the Viet Cong. The fourth VC, dripping wet in his lily pad costume, surrendered to the Marine patrol."

—Official MACV (Military Advisory Command Vietnam) communique No. 107-66, 17 April.

The Urge to Be "Constructive"

Our capacity for overlooking the obvious is enormous. Even one of the best and most independent reporters here was shocked by the anti-Americanism of reeent demonstrations in Saigon and in Hue and Danang. He shares the naive view that we are there to help the Vietnamese and regards the demonstrations as sheer ingratitude. The simple fact that occupying armies, whether allied or enemy, always become unpopular hardly ever figures in official calculation. It would be too hard to reconcile it with the planned steady increase in the number of troops. This, in a country as fiercely nationalistic as Vietnam, spells more trouble of the same kind but to face the facts might force us to recast our policy. An experienced British correspondent told me that several months ago he raised with a U.S. official the resentment and annoyance created by the influx of foreign troops, with the money to get first choice of everything from women to pedicabs. He predicted that urban unrest might prove worse than the trouble in the villages. He was told he ought to try and be more "constructive."

A group of Buddhist neutralists of whom I shall tell more in my next letter published a volume in French and English called *Dialogue*. In one of them Pham Cong Thien writes, "Here is my Nada prayer: Lead us not into Salvation, but deliver us from Deliverance." This is the true cry of the heart from a country torn apart.

Next week: How the Vietnamese Feel About The War

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NEWSPAPER

IFS Will Speak on His Trip at the Peace Rally, Washington Monument, 2 p.m., May 15

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